Russell Allen Phillips was born August 1, 1916 in Greencastle, Indiana to Russell Lemuel Phillips and Mary Kelsey Phillips (née Allen). Russell Allen Phillips' paternal great grandfather, Milton Phillips, had roots in Virginia and the Phillips family had settled in Madison County, Indiana around the 1850s. His maternal grandparents, William Allen and Martha Allen (née Kelsey) had traveled to Terre Haute from Kingman, Kansas in the early 1900s. His grandfather, William, worked as a carpenter and lived with the Phillips' family after his wife's death in 1911. Russell Allen Phillips' maternal aunt, Emma Kelsey, lived with the family as well and died in 1936 shortly after their move to Terre Haute.

Russell Phillips, Sr. was completing his seminary studies at DePauw University at the time of his son's birth. Russell Allen Phillips spent much of his childhood in Northwestern Indiana, his father pastoring churches in South Bend and LaPorte. Russell, Sr. would eventually become a chaplain with the Army during World War II and it was during his service in the European theatre that he would receive news of the harrowing ordeals faced by his son.

When Russell Allen graduated from high school, he attended Purdue University to study agricultural studies. His parents and younger sister, Martha, moved to Terre Haute in 1936 and it was through Terre Haute and his sister, Martha, that he was introduced to his future wife, Cecil Perry, the daughter of George O. Perry, the general manager of Citizens Independent Telephone Company.

Cecil, who went by Cecy, was in her senior year at Indiana State Teachers' College when Russell Allen enlisted in the air corps on November 7, 1941 at Fort Benjamin Harrison. Perhaps feeling a sense of urgency, Russell Allen knew at the time of his enlistment that he wanted to marry Cecy. On her 21st birthday in May 1942, he sent her his paycheck for the purpose of buying an engagement ring. He was not aware at the time that this would prove to be a very long engagement.

Russell Allen received the majority of his training in Ephrata, Washington where he met Olympic track star and bombardier in training, Louie Zamperini and became very close friends. Zamperini had been a troubled youth. A native of Torrance, California, his Italian immigrant family made him the object of bullying, forcing him to turn to fighting to defend himself. In Phillips, Zamperini must have seen a kind spirited preacher's son who only sought friendship.

Phillips, Zamperini and other crew members were instrumental in bombing raids over the island of Wake Atoll in December 1942. Zamperini served as the bombardier and Phillips as the pilot of his first B-24 plane, nicknamed "Super Man." In May 1943, the crew was transferred to the 42nd Squadron of the 11th Bomb Group. Aboard another B-24 called "the Green Hornet" the crew became lost at sea during a search for another lost aircraft and crew. For 47 days, Phillips, Zamperini, and the other surviving crew, were lost at sea, resorting to desperate measures to stay alive, only to be captured as prisoners of war on the final day.

While Phillips and Zamperini were facing severe torment by Watanabe, the infamous Japanese prison guard, their families were left in the dark about their whereabouts. Members of the

Zamperini family learned through short-wave radio broadcasts in December 1944 that Phillips and Zamperini had been captured as prisoners of war. One can imagine the devastation of Russell Phillips, Sr. in Europe upon receiving the news and the longing to be reunited felt by Russell Allen's bride-to-be while Phillips and Zamperini faced the greatest demoralizing trials of their lives.

Cecil Perry's longing was worthwhile. Russell Allen was released in September 1945 and on November 10, 1945, four years and three days to the date that Russell Allen enlisted in the air corps, Cecil Perry and Russell Allen Phillips were united in marriage. Russell, Sr. performed the ceremony after his return from Europe. Russell Allen and Cecy moved to LaPorte, Indiana, where they raised a son and daughter and lived relatively simple lives. Russell Allen died in December 1998 and Cecy died November 18, 2002.